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Connecting Young Children and Their Families to American Roots

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Abstract:

This paper will uncover the similarities between American folk music and Central and South American songs of revolution as a way to connect new immigrants to American culture. I will then discuss ways in which teachers can use music and songbooks to teach literacy, particularly to emergent language learners. Finally, I have translated and illustrated a popular English folk song, "If I had a Hammer," by Pete Seeger, as a bilingual tool for early childhood teachers to begin the conversation about the connections between the varying classroom cultures.

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Introduction

One of the most significant aspects of many cultures is found in a given culture's oral and musical traditions. Whether through song or chant, these musical (and other oral) traditions explore and explain the rich history of a culture and are passed down from generation to generation. Folk songs "preserve and illustrate subtleties better than most historical sources" and while they serve "as tools to illustrate and understand history; they are not a ready-made substitute for history" (Rodnitzky, 1999). American folk music and roots music, in particular, carry the traditions of storytelling through song and can serve as musical snapshots of a time or event. However, the very definition of folk and roots music continues to evolve over time. According to Pete Seeger, "If folks sing them, they're folksongs" (Seeger, 1965, page 9).

As the child of two participants in the Civil Rights Movement, I grew up singing songs like, "Talking Union," "Deportees," and "If I Had A Hammer." When my family sang these songs, my parents would often tell stories about their own memories of the Civil Rights Movement. My Grandfather, who was a big supporter of unions, would sing some of these same songs with my mother and her sisters, and then explain to them why unions were so important to workers and to the development and identity of the country as a whole. I see these songs as links to both a national and familial or personal past. All of these songs are direct links to my country's past as well as its future.

These songs bring to light some of the important historical issues like unions, immigration, and our right to freedom of speech that continue to challenge Americans to this day. In 1941 Millard Lampell, Lee Hays, and Pete Seeger wrote these words:

Now, if you want higher wages let me tell you what to do

You got to talk to the workers in the shop with you
You got to build you a union, got to make it strong
But if you all stick together, boys, it won't be long
You get shorter hours, better working conditions
Vacations with pay. Take your kids to the seashore.

These six lines tell a clear story about what was happening during the 1940s. It reflects the feelings of a necessary coming together of workers and their families in order to gain their deserved rights. The rhyme scheme and accessible melody, which is common in most folk songs, was also significant in making these songs sing-able by all. "Talking Union" was sung at protests, at community meetings, and at concerts. Simple rhythm and melody are also important qualities that make children's music accessible, so it is no surprise that many teachers find that folk songs are useful classroom tools.

As an early childhood educator, music is one of the most significant tools that I incorporate within my own classroom to connect children and their families to the curriculum. In this paper, I will explore the various and important roles of music, specifically the ways in which folk music can connect to young children and their families. I will use my findings to recommend ways in which teachers can use the oral tradition in their own classrooms. This paper will focus mostly on immigrant families who are beginning to put down their roots in the United States. I have chosen to focus on immigrant populations not only because of my own personal interest, but more importantly, because immigrant families make up a significant portion of our ever growing population and enrich our communities with their own cultural traditions. Of the current 317 million people in the United States, over 50 million are immigrants, which

means that an even larger population will be made up by the children of those immigrants (Camarota, 2014).

Building Bridges through Folk Music

Teachers can serve as cultivators and build bridges to invite the new immigrants into their classrooms. Teachers, however, "need to understand the importance of cultural roots" (Igoa, 1995, p 40). Many immigrants have strong folk music traditions similar to those we have in the United States. If teachers can understand both traditions, they will be able to build bridges between cultures, a feat which will undoubtedly benefit teachers, parents, students and their school communities because "understanding and respecting the immigrants' native cultural attitude is as important in helping them learn a second language" (Igoa, 1995, p 69). Specifically, I explore how folk music, as a particularly accessible tool, can serve teachers, children and families in helping them to communicate and share important cultural traditions.

It is not surprising that music plays an important role in conserving various cultures because music is the most accessible art form that exists. While acoustic instruments are often used, no additional tools are needed to sing a song, just a voice. Within many cultures throughout the world, folk songs are used to capture and retell important historical moments. For example, in Nicaraguan folk music of the 1970s, the Mejia Godoy family used their songs to relay messages to the Sandinistas who were fighting the Somosa dictatorship during the Nicaraguan Revolution. Carlos Mejia Godoy's album, "Guitarra Armada," which was released in 1979, featured a number of songs whose lyrics explained ways to assemble a rifle or explosives (Sevilla, 2007). The

songs written and sung by the Mejia Godoy family have gone on to serve as significant pieces of the fabric of Nicaraguan history. "Nicaragua, Nicaraguita" essentially became the country's anthem after the revolution and it serves as a reminder of the homeland that so many fought for and risked their lives for.

Similarly, in the United States, enslaved Africans used songs to transmit messages across plantations. The "Gospel Train" song was code for the Underground Railroad. The chorus beckoned children to "Get on board little children; Get on board little children; Get on board little children; There's room for many more." In "Follow the Drinking Gourd," Peg Leg Joe taught many slaves the route to freedom by using code words to show them the escape routes that marked the Underground Railroad (Winter, 1988). Escapees knew they were on their way when on their route to freedom, they found the charcoal markings left by Peg Leg Joe that symbolized they were on the right track.

Songs were not only used to subvert oppressive conditions, they were also used to write history. In Latin America, Chilean teacher and singer-songwriter, Victor Jara, who lost first his hands and then his life under the Allende dictatorship, wrote and sang songs which also serve as important historical reminders for those whose country has in some respects been shaped by both political and social oppression and uprising (Tyler, 2013). Not unlike the Mejia Godoys or Victor Jara, is Mercedes Sosa, an Argentine folk singer who was known at the "voice of the voiceless." Sosa was known for many of her songs including a rendition of "Duerme Negrito," which is a lullaby sung to a child whose mother cannot sing the song because she is working in the campo. While Sosa did not write the song, her rendition reflects an important and at the time, national sentiment about the ways in which the members of the oppressed working class of Argentina, who

were often Argentines with darker skin, were unable to spend time singing their own children to sleep because they were working long, hard hours in the campo in order to provide for their families.

Duerme, duerme, negrito (sleep, sleep, little black child)

Que tu mama está en el campo, negrito (You're mom is in the fields, child)

Trabajando, Trabajando duramente (Working, working hard)

Trabajando, Trabajando e va de luto (Working, she is mourning)

Trabajando, Trabajando y no le pagan (Working, she doesn't get paid)

Trabajando, Trabajando pa' negrito chiquitito (Working, for you, little black child)

The issues that come up in this song are not unlike the issues that members of the civil rights movements were singing about in the United States. This song not only addresses the oppression of the working class, but also the fact that race issues were (and still are) very present in the minds and social experiences of Latin Americans. These comparisons are small but significant clues that cross cultural connections can be found in folk music. Similarly to "Talking Union," this song, with it's accessible melody and rhyme scheme serves as both a lullaby and as a window into the history of the working class in Latin America, which exemplified the link between folk music and children's music.

These are a small group of singers, who like Pete Seeger, used folk music as a way to preserve and capture significant historical moments. The main element of folk songs is that they are sung by folks and even though the musical form of folk songs varies between and within cultures, the commonality among the songs is that they are accessible and repetitious. These qualities may explain why many early childhood teachers utilize folk songs within classrooms. In an early childhood classroom,

repeatable and accessible songs are often the most useful not only when it comes to deepening a classroom's culture, but also with regards to day-to-day transitions or tasks. For the same reasons, songs are often utilized to help and support newly arrived immigrants, many of whom do not speak English. The following section will make a connection between music and books to show how together these tools can be used in a classroom of emergent language learners.

Music and books: A means of supporting the development of all learners including ELLs

At best, classrooms are comfortable and warm environments that are rich with potential experiences, accessible materials and a diverse and reflective classroom culture. In the rest of this paper, I will focus on two valuable resources which support all kinds of learners, especially English Language Learners (ELLs): books and music. Using these tools can help teachers create classrooms that are literacy rich and serve their students and families.

One day, while singing "This Land Is Your Land" with the four-year-olds in my class, my teaching partner handed me a picture book of the Woody Guthrie song, illustrated by Kathy Jakobsen (1998). I had never seen the book before, but I opened it up while we were in the middle of the first chorus and continued singing the entire song with the book. During the choruses, the children joined in with confidence and during the verses, they quieted down and focused intently on the pictures. While I had used songbooks before, I had never seen an illustrated folk songbook.

My students and I fell in love with the book and before long, we all knew the words to each verse. It wasn't until I overheard one of my students singing to herself

"*but on the other side, it didn't say nothin', that side was made for you and me*," that I was struck by how well students had learned the verses. I realized how the relationship between the music and the book as visual had enriched my students oral language development, memory, and comprehension about the true meaning of the lyrics. The song and the book complemented one another to make the material accessible to all my students. While I utilize all kinds of songs in my classroom, this song felt particularly important not only because of its message, but also because of its history. That is when I began thinking about folk music as a central tool to build a literacy-rich curriculum. Writing down folk music and illustrating its key parts provide a window into the past and a connection to the present. Moreover, for communities who are newer to this country, folk songs would be useful as bridge builders between the home and host countries.

Extensive research has been done supporting the role of both books and music in an early childhood classroom (Gardner, 2011; Lems, 2001; Lukens, 2007; Robertson, 2006; Smallwood & Hayes, 2008). While my intentions are to spend more time discussing the ways in which music and books can be used together to support emerging language learners, in order to understand this more specific idea, it is important to provide some basic information about music and books within early childhood settings. However, I will simply be skimming the surface of expansive research that supports the idea that music and books are vital to early childhood development.

Music is an important and accessible tool for all learners. According to Howard Gardner's theory on Multiple Intelligences, music intelligence is equally as important as mathematical, linguistic, spatial, kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal intelligence (Gardner, 2011). This is to say that music, alongside other forms of intelligences makes

up the foundation for the varying kinds of learners in our world. It also suggests that music, like math, is an essential piece of a child's developing mind and body. Therefore, "to ensure a comprehensive [learning] experience, music must be included in early childhood" classrooms (Levinowitz, 1998). According to the Center for Applied Linguistics at UC Berkeley, "singing in unison allows children to comfortably participate as part of a group" and while "singing is not appealing to all children, singable books provide an additional tool to engage students in active learning" (Smallwood & Hayes, 2008, p. 2).

A good children's book can transport, inform, and excite its readers. Lukens (2007) asserts that "children, like adults, read to explore the world, to escape the confining present, to discover themselves, to become someone else" (p. xi). Not only are books integral to our sense of emotional and social development, but it can expand our academic prowess. For emergent speakers, books and oral story-telling provide the foundation for what will be their emergent literacy skills. In addition, using a songbook in an early childhood classroom with ELLs, provides the kind of scaffolding that allows all kinds of learners the opportunity to reach their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). For both aural and visual learners, hearing a song with the support of the book as a visual is extremely valuable. Additionally, because musical and language processing occur in the same area of the brain, there "appear [to be] parallels in how musical and linguistic syntax are processed" (Lems, 2001). Therefore, music supports the process of language acquisition, which is the foundation for literacy.

Arguably the most valuable components for English Language Learners are motivation, confidence and validation (Tabors, ?). Educators know that a child's ZPD

(zone of proximal development) is dependent upon a number of factors, mainly their level of confidence (Vygotsky, 1978). A lack there of, leaves a child unmotivated, uninterested and disconnected from their classroom environment. "It's worth noting that different kinds of activities may give ELLs an opportunity to participate in ways that build their confidence or fit their learning styles — a student who is shy or insecure may surprise with you a music or art assignment" (Robertson, 2006). Therefore, in a classroom with ELLs, this begs the question, how can educators create accessible learning experiences for all kinds of learners, so that all members of the group feel confident enough in themselves to explore and take risks with new experiences? Music naturally elicits fun, low pressure and often communal experiences which connect members of a group to one another. A cultural exchange of books and music within a classroom is also an important way to validate all of the members of a group and their varying cultural backgrounds.

Music & Books as Cross Cultural Connectors: **A Personal Story about Teaching 4 year olds**

Books and music provide important cross cultural opportunities within a classroom because it connects teachers to students, but also students to their caretakers. In my classroom of 4 and 5 year old students, many of the caretakers are women from Spanish speaking countries. Given my understanding about the importance of music and books as reviewed above, I chose to teach students from Orozco's compilation of Latin American songs titled, *Diez Deditos (Ten Fingers).* I decided to use a song from this book called "*Diez deditos"* with my class of four-year-olds, despite the fact that none of the students in my group spoke Spanish at home. Not only did I want to connect the

music to the children's caretakers, but I wanted to introduce them to a language that has been part of my own cultural upbringing. As a fluent Spanish speaker, I am always looking to infuse our curriculum with Spanish and I was hoping to begin a conversation about Spanish-speaking countries. I was unsure of how to tackle the topic with the four-year-olds in my group and more importantly, how to relate it to the group and keep it relevant.

After singing the *Diez Deditos* song a number of times throughout the week, and trying to scaffold a discussion about languages, I was just about ready to give-up with what I had hoped would be part of our emergent curriculum. Then, one day at drop off, one of my students' caregivers, Ms. Lila [pseudonym] came up to me and told me how Henry [pseudonym], the child she cared for, came home singing *"Diez Deditos."* She had tears in her eyes as she told me that she used to sing the song to her own children when they were little. Her own children are still in Mexico and have their own children. Ms. Lila cannot be with them and this song was symbolically important to her. Before leaving, Ms. Lila thanked me for teaching the song to the group and said that she couldn't wait to sing it with Henry after school today. During the school day, we sang the song again and Henry asked to share with the group, "Ms. Lila sings this same song with her kids in Mexico, where she's from. They speak Spanish there."

This song ended up being the jumping off point for a discussion about languages, countries and it eventually lead us into a family study, where we asked the students to ask their grown-ups about the places they come from, which included caregivers. While many of the families were very happy to participate in the family studies, I was moved by the ways in which many of the caregivers participated and delighted in sharing songs and

stories from their countries of birth. Our group learned songs from Jamaica, Saint Lucia, Thailand, Mexico, Poland, and the Philippines. While this particular group did not have any immigrant families or ELLs, singing various songs is an example of how children can learn about other cultures and peoples with whom they live side by side. The onus to learn about the world, then cultures that surround us in New York City should not rest on immigrants or ELLs; rather, all children should be exposed to the beauty of various cultural perspectives. Songs and books are one way in which you can bring these connections into the classroom.

If one of our goals as teachers is to consider and cultivate the whole child, then we must consider the varying communities that children are a part of (Sprague-Mitchell, 1950). Creating a home/school connection is an essential part of this process, and song and books are accessible tools for both children and teachers. Considering the ever-growing number of immigrant families and children of immigrants in the United States, we, as teachers, must explore and include books and songs in other languages for all our children. New York City is home to a people from all over the world and is a particularly rich cultural community, simply by nature of proximity. Therefore, I feel that it is my responsibility to seek out moments for cross cultural connections in order to "preserve the cultural identity of the children" (Igoa, 1995, p. 109) and the grownups around them by allowing children to speak and sing in their mother tongue as well as other languages. A vast number of cultures makes up the fabric of both our immediate and national community and it is essential that teachers allow these rich elements to inform their classrooms and curriculum.

"If I had a Hammer": A bilingual tool for the early childhood educator

In an effort to create a useful and accessible bilingual classroom tool, I created a bilingual children's book, which uses the words to the popular folk song "If I Had A Hammer" or "Si Tuviera Un Martillo." One of the most challenging aspects of this process was deciding upon a Spanish translation that seemed to both honor the words of the song and remain singable. After looking into a few different translations, I decided upon the translation that most directly translated the words of the song not only because that honors the message of the song, but only because I want this book would be used as an language learning tool in all early childhood classrooms.

The basic layout of the book is simple and clean. I have chosen to highlight the two different languages by using two different colors, which remain consistent throughout the book. My final goal is to complete another version of this book in collaboration with a Bolivian artist, Antonieta Gomez, who is a friend and a member of a teaching artist collective that I have worked with since 2006. Antonieta often draws pictures of diverse groups of children who are ethnically ambiguous and that is one of the primary reasons I look forward to collaborating with her. I also think that by the nature of our two differing cultures, she will have her own literal and figurative translation of the song which will inform her illustrations. Nonetheless, this first version has both the visual and linguistic essence of what I hope will grow into a more colorful version down the line.

I have submitted this version as part of my independent thesis because I would like to illustrate how teachers can follow their passions to enrich their own classrooms. Music has always been a part of my life and creating a bilingual songbook is an extension

of my own cultural heritage. If a teacher finds a song (in any language) that is a group favorite, there are many different ways to take ownership of the song and its role in the classroom by making a book. Children can participate in the process. I would argue that the key to constructing a well-loved and used classroom book is to draw on the various family cultures that exist within the classroom, school community and neighborhoods. The book can be illustrated with drawings by parents or children or with class photos. This allows children to really take ownership of the book.

I decided to illustrate the American folk song "If I Had A Hammer" not only because I have a personal connection to the song, but also because it is has important ties that relate back to a shared national history. Singing the song with young children is similar to telling folk stories. It is important and powerful to pass along these significant songs in order to share significant pieces of a shared national past. However, I encourage teachers to chose songs that are meaningful to them personally and to the group of children they are working with. There is no wrong way to chose a song, however there are many elements to consider. An illustrated songbook is only one way to weave community music making into a classroom culture. Teachers should be looking out for opportunities to incorporate their passions through songs and stories that reflect the cultural diversity not just within their classroom, but also throughout their local and international communities.

Conclusion:

Music and books are key components of early childhood classrooms all over the world. Spoken language skills are precursors to literacy skills, therefore the two

inevitably compliment one another. The key to utilizing books and music in order to support cultural diversity begins with a group of children and their teachers who naturally create their own classroom culture by simply sharing a common space. Favorite songs and books will emerge as a group of children grow and learn together and it is the teacher's job to make note of these clues and create classroom tools alongside their students in order to support these naturally occurring interests and curiosities.

Teachers have the power and responsibility to allow their classrooms to be infused with the music and stories of both the past and the present. The means by which a teacher utilizes books and music will inevitably vary depending on the teacher, the group of children, the school, the environment, etc. Nonetheless, I hope that I have been able to emphasize the significance and accessibility of folk music within a classroom as a means to support pre-literacy skills, culturally responsive teaching and emergent classroom culture.

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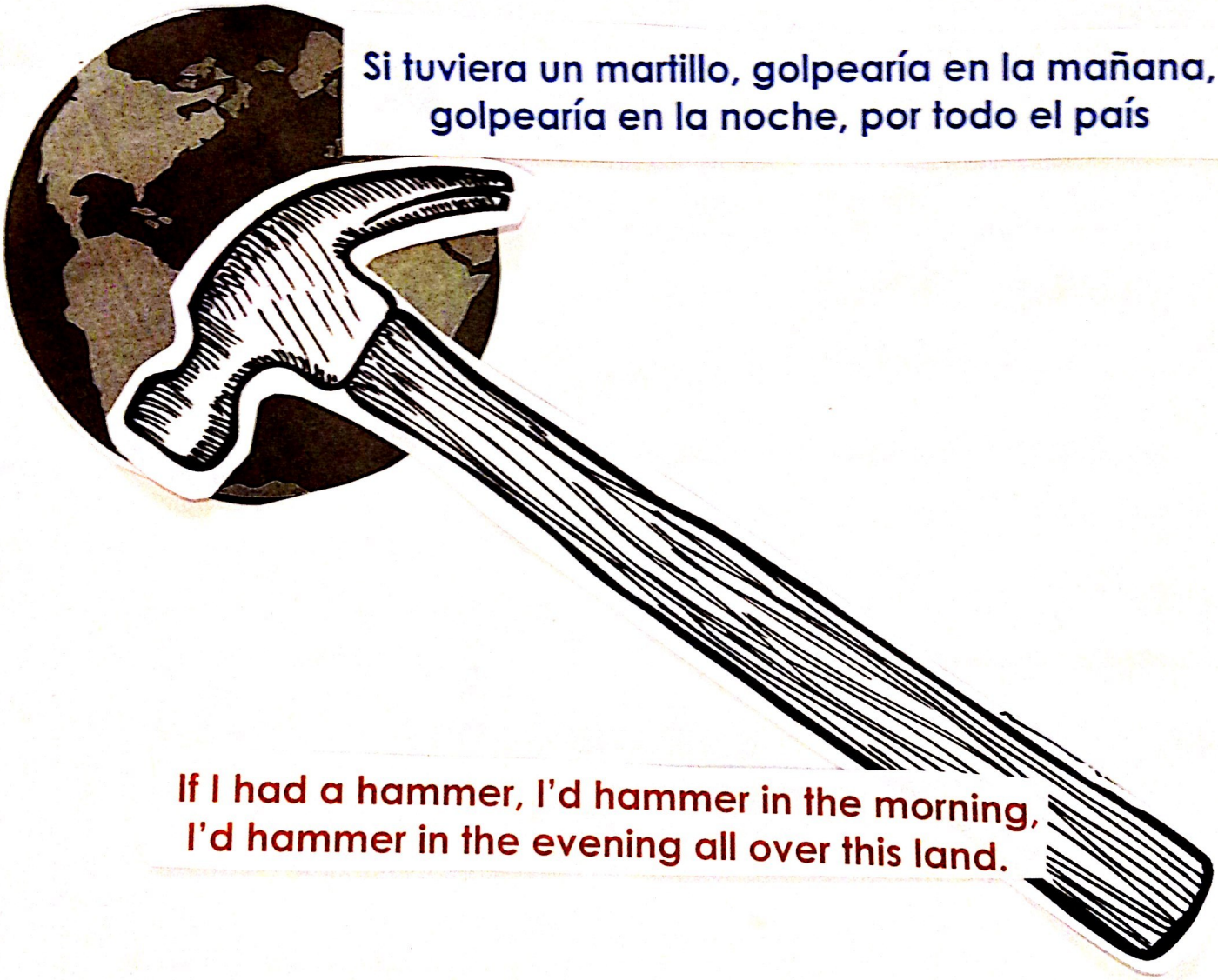
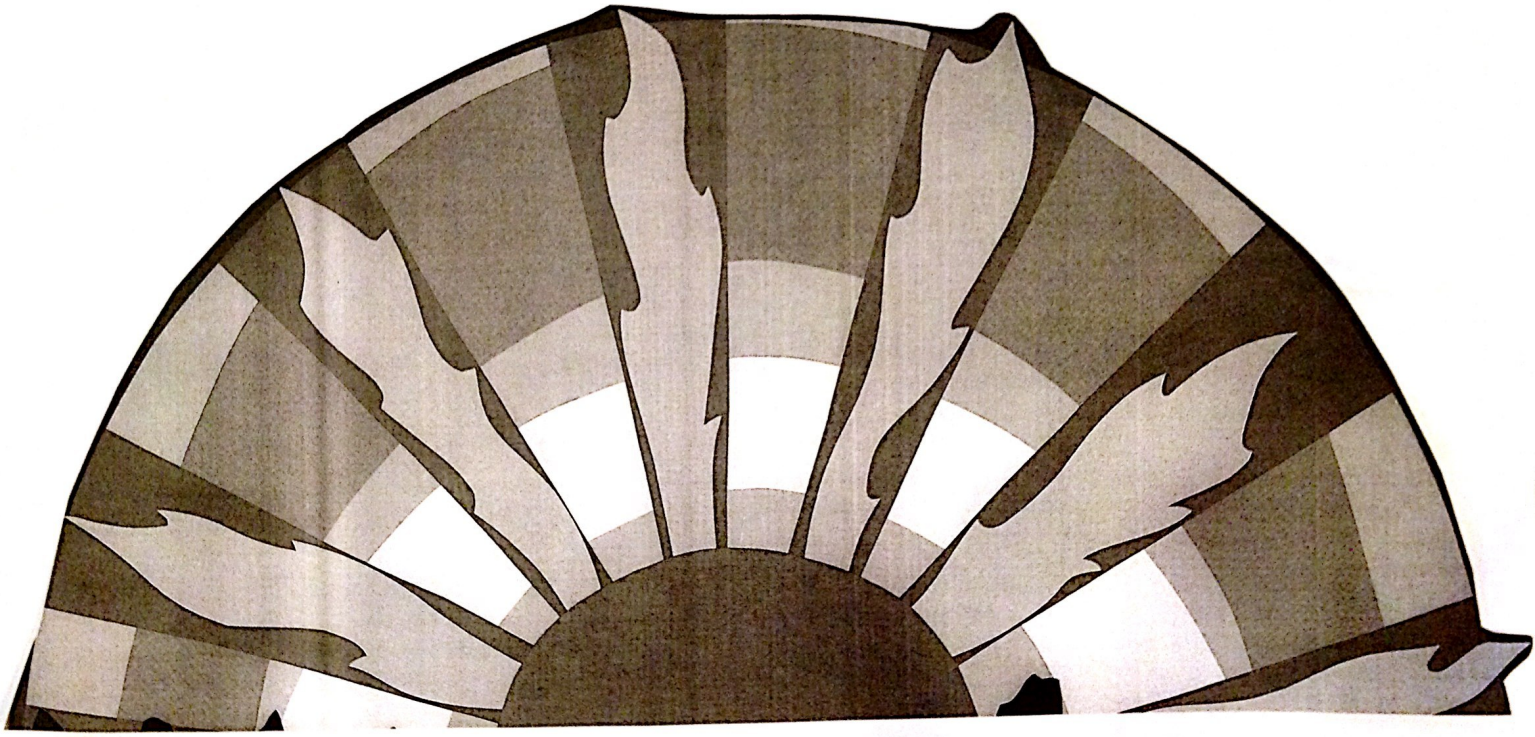


Si tuviera un martillo, golpearía en la mañana,
golpearía en la noche, por todo el país

If I had a hammer, I'd hammer in the morning,
I'd hammer in the evening all over this land.

Alerta del peligro, alerta la advertencia, alerta el



I'd hammer out danger, I'd hammer out a warning,

amor entre mis hermanos y hermanas por todo esta tierra

I'd hammer out love between my brothers and my sisters all over this land.

Si tuviera una campana, tocaría en la mañana, tocaría en la noche, por todo el país

If I had a bell, I'd ring it in the morning, I'd ring it in the evening all over this land

Alerta del peligro, alerta la advertencia, alerta el

I'd ring out danger, I'd ring out a warning, I'd ring out

amor entre mis hermanos y hermanas por todo esta tierra.

love between my brothers and my sisters all over this land.

Si tuviera una canción, cantaría en la mañana,
cantaría en la noche, por todo el país.

If I had a song, I'd sing it in the morning, I'd sing it the evening all over this land.

Alerta del peligro, alerta la advertencia, alerta el

I'd Sing out danger, I'd sing out a warning, I'd sing out

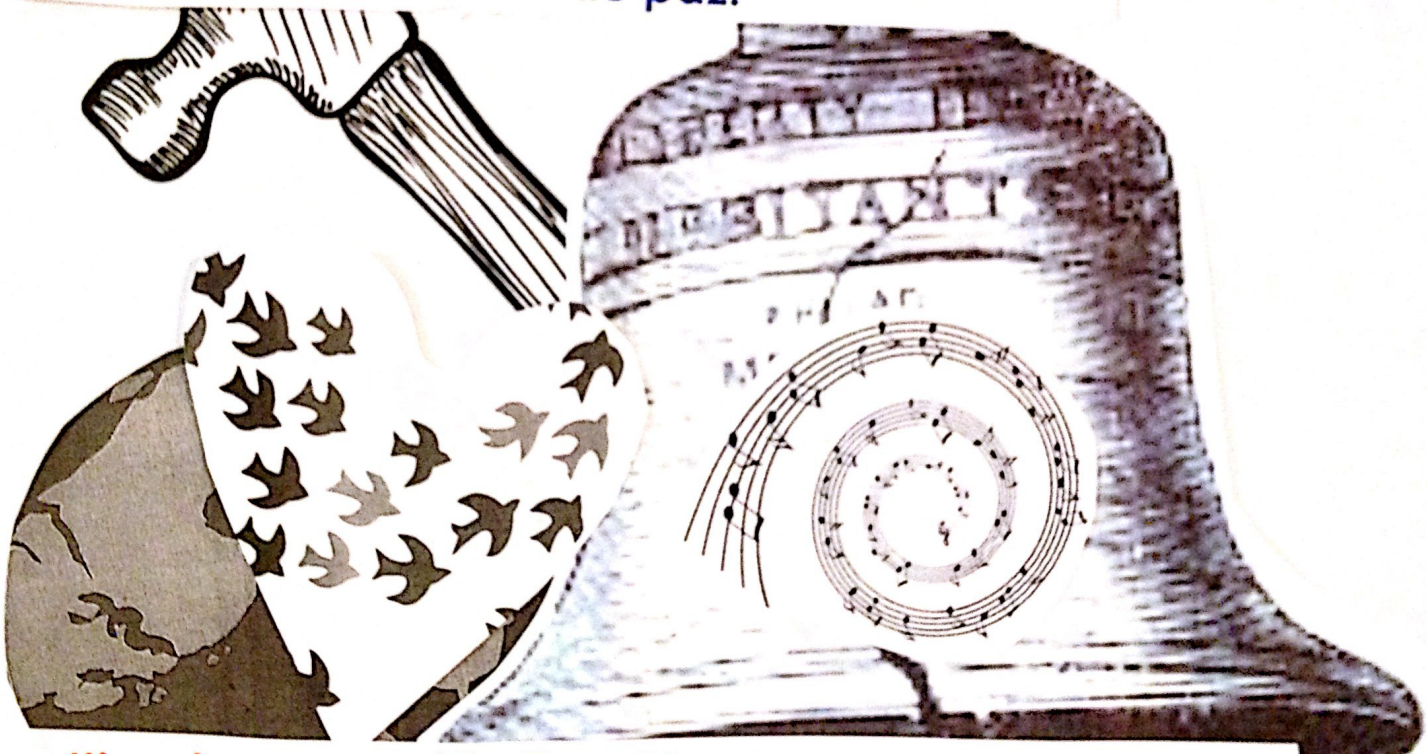
amor entre mis hermanos y hermanas por todo esta tierra.

love between my brothers and my sisters all over this land.

Ahora tengo un martillo, y tengo una campana, y tengo una canción que cantar, por todo el país.

Now, I have a hammer, and I have a bell and I have a song to sing all over this land.

Martillo de justicia, campana de libertad, y una canción de paz.



It's a hammer of justice, it's a bell of freedom, it's a song about love between my brothers and my sisters all over this land.